



**WHAT WE BELIEVE  
ABOUT ETHNIC  
AND CULTURAL  
DIVERSITY**

**commongroundchurch**  
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# DIVERSITY AND HUMAN RELATIONS

## PURPOSE

To have a doctrinal statement on a gospel-informed response to human relations. This can be used to inform and guide further decisions, relating to topics of ethnicity and cultural diversity. Common Ground Church is a gospel community that seeks to fill the city with the message, life, and fame of Jesus. This is done by planting churches, strengthening churches and equipping people to excel in evangelism, discipleship, community, biblical justice and societal renewal. We are based in Cape Town, South Africa, and this paper is written within and for this context. In the pursuit of this mission, issues of human relations are crucial. Our history and current social context demand the church to lead with clarity and conviction. The church is to be a prophetic voice, reading the context and bringing God's truth to bear. Christ-followers are to be shaped by the word and live in the context God has for them. As a church, we want to be led by scripture, informed by our context and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

*This paper is not intended to be political in nature and recognises that Common Ground Church is not the only entity that is working towards reconciliation.*

## WE BELIEVE

### **1. GOD ALONE ESTABLISHES TRUE PEACE ( SHALOM ) AND JUSTICE AND HIS FOLLOWERS ARE TO JOIN HIM IN THIS WORK.**

One of the names of God is Jehovah-Shalom (Judges 6:24), a God of Justice (Isaiah 30:18) and as being love itself (1 John 4:8). He is working in the world to restore and renew things broken by the fall so that his creation reflects his character.

His followers are to be part of his work in establishing shalom. Jeremiah 29:7 shows how followers are to pray for and seek shalom. The early church was exhorted to embrace the unity that Christ had established. Ephesians 4:3 says "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace". Christ-followers have been unified in Christ, and we are to maintain that. There are obstacles that hinder or slow down the expression of that unity. Seeking unity is, therefore, becoming who we are already. Phil 1:27 shows us that we are to stand side by side with other believers for the faith of the gospel.

## **2. ACTIONS AND ATTITUDES THAT UNDERMINE THIS PEACE AND JUSTICE ARE THEREFORE SINFUL.**

If God's plan is unity in diversity, peace and diversity, any actions and attitudes that undermine this unity, peace, and diversity are sins – an offence to God. This includes racism, prejudice, xenophobia, sexism, tribalism and other forms of discrimination based on ethnicity, culture, class, gender, and skin colour. Internal attitudes of looking down on others, thoughts of superiority or inferiority, enmity and hatred are sinful, too. There exists no defensible doctrine to support racism, intolerance and bigotry.

If you don't move towards being reconciled with others, then you don't have the relationship *with God you think you do*. *1 John 2:9* says "Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness." To work against unity, or passively wait for others to 'do it' is to not participate in Jesus' work and mission.

Treating people differently because of their ethnic heritage is not a stand-alone sin. It expresses itself as many acts of the flesh - listed in Galatians 5:20-21: hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy. It is idolatry, using ethnicity as a means to elevate oneself and push others down, or to elevate one other group above another. It is not a new sin, unique to recent history. James spoke to this very issue: "Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be" (3:10). Much of our racism, prejudice and discrimination is rooted in our speech, which starts in our minds (James 2:4).

## **3. JESUS IS OUR PERFECT MODEL FOR ENGAGING WITH HUMAN DIVERSITY AND EXPRESSING RADICAL INCLUSION.**

### **All ethnicities were created by God and were declared good (G en 1:26,31).**

All of humanity can be traced back to one set of parents: Adam and Eve. All ethnicities are derived from this 'very good creation' - we are created different and this is still good. It is sin that has broken down human relationships, and therefore the work of Christ in believers' hearts will bring about a gospel-infused honour for all others.

### **In his earthly ministry, Jesus modelled radical inclusion.**

He regularly moved toward those who were discriminated against in their social groupings. Examples of ethnic inclusion include John 4 – Samaritan woman; Matthew 15 – Syrophenician woman; Matthew 8 – Roman centurion. We also see Jesus moving towards different socio-political groupings: Matt 9, Luke 19 – tax collectors; Matt 6:15 – zealots; Luke 17 – lepers.

### **Being non-racist is insufficient.**

God would have his followers be ethnicity- and culture-affirming. This goes beyond tolerance or neutrality. In revealing Peter's ethnic intolerance, God did not call him to tolerate Cornelius (a Gentile), but to embrace him (Acts 10).

## **JESUS ABOLISHED THE DIVIDING WALL BETWEEN JEW AND GENTILE, CREATING ONE NEW HUMANITY (E PH 2:11-22).**

These historically irreconcilable people groups were brought to unity under Jesus. Jesus works to reconcile people to himself and to make peace between each other. All ethnic differences can be overcome by the work of Christ, turning people from foreigners and strangers into fellow citizens with each other as God's people. Unity is a work of God's spirit in his followers as well as a reality that must be pursued and sought.

## **4. JESUS GIVES HIS FOLLOWERS A NEW IDENTITY THAT SUPERSEDES ALL OTHER IDENTITIES.**

### **All human beings have equal worth in each bearing the image of God (Gen 1:26).**

Therefore our ethnicity, culture and heritage do not elevate our worth above others, as this is a secondary identity before God.

### **In coming to faith in Christ, people are adopted into God's family (Rom 8:15; Eph 1:5).**

This makes fellow believers brothers and sisters; not step-siblings. There is no hierarchy of sonship. For this reason, Paul writes "So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view" 2 Cor 5:16.

### **Our ethnicity and heritage do not give us standing before God.**

The only thing that gives us worth before God is what Christ accomplished. Our worth, value or justification does not depend on anything in us, whether inherited from our parents or achieved by us. Galatians 3:23-29 and Colossians 2:11 both reinforce the idea that old means of distinction and wrongful attitudes of superiority and inferiority - before God and before others - have been abolished.

### **Our ethnic identity is secondary to our identity in Christ.**

Our God-given culture and ethnicity are precious, but not perfect. The sanctifying work of God in our lives will lead to us letting go of cultural practices that do not honour him. In this way, upon coming to faith, we retain our culture, but God redeems us into a Christ-honouring expression of it. This is a lifelong journey and is central to our sanctification.

### **Love for and obedience to Christ must override cultural norms.**

One must not have allegiance to one's own culture and identity at the expense of Christ's teachings. Matt 10:37 says "Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. 38 Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me."

## **5. RATHER THAN BEING AN OBSTACLE, GOD'S DESIGN OF ETHNIC DIVERSITY IS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR MISSION, MUTUAL SERVICE AND CULTURAL ENRICHMENT.**

Building relational bridges across ethnic divides allow for the gospel to flow in new ways. Acts 10:45-46 shows how Peter's obedience to overcome his prejudice led to gospel proclamation. Jesus, in John 17, prays for the unity of his followers, and verse 23 tells us that this unity is a missional message: a unified community of Christ-followers models to the rest of the world what redeemed humanity can be like. What is seen to be fraught with difficulty by the rest of the world is shown to be both possible and celebrated.

Diversity brings value to the body of Christ, as we play different parts and bring different gifts to bear (1 Cor 12:12-31). A homogenous faith community is deficient; missing out on the mutual service and enrichment that comes from each playing their part.

It is significant that the first gospel sermon recorded, in Acts 2, was proclaimed in a multiplicity of languages. Supernatural empowerment to speak in languages everyone understood demonstrated how God is at work to bring together what was separated. What was separated at the tower of Babel in Genesis 11 was united under the work of the Spirit in Acts 2. Reasons or excuses for being separate were shown by God to be insufficient reasons – he is at work to overcome them.

Christ-followers have a more profound understanding of human dignity, as this concept is rooted in the truth that all humans bear the image of God. This empowers them to engage with people who are not Christ-followers because we all share a fundamental identity: we are all sinners, alienated from God. That shared identity is deeper than the external and cultural identities in which we have been raised.

## **6. ONLY CHRIST OFFERS SUFFICIENT GRACE AND FORGIVENESS FOR PREJUDICIAL ACTIONS AND ATTITUDES.**

If someone claims to be a Christ-follower, but still holds prejudicial attitudes, beliefs and behaviour, it is to be an area of repentance. Racism and related behaviour is a sin. Therefore, we know that Jesus has conquered it (Rom 6:6-7). This sin has been rendered powerless, but as with any other area of sanctification, it is a journey of repentance. This is an ongoing journey, with reflection and daily renewal of the mind (Romans 12:1-2). Through the conviction of the Holy Spirit, there can be confession, repentance and restoration. No one should feel paralysing guilt. Instead, the conviction should lead to the admission of guilt, leaving old practices behind and adopting new habits. As with other areas of sanctification, the best place for growing in this area is the local church, with diverse relationships and accountability.

## **WE RECOGNISE**

### **1. THE APARTHEID ERA IS A DARK CHAPTER IN THE HISTORY OF OUR COUNTRY.**

South Africa does not have an ordinary history. We face our past, not to bludgeon people, but to gain a correct perspective. Having a better understanding of the various parts of our history will provide insight into systemic issues and the part we play today in unravelling them.

We are grateful to God for the peaceful transition to democracy. We recognise, too, that this change has been incomplete. There is still more transformation required to bring about a just and equitable society. What exists in our society now is short of what God would have in our country and people.

The church's place in this chapter of our country is complex. There were certain churches that were complicit in promoting apartheid, others who fought it, and still more who disengaged from the issue. For these reasons, we recognise that the broader church in South Africa was not wholly innocent or pure during these years. This has had devastating implications for credibility and mission.

## **2. OUR HISTORY HAS RESULTED IN A SHARPLY UNEQUAL SOCIETY.**

Through policies and laws supported and entrenched by people, a society was created that was sharply unequal. Due to the nature of these systemic issues, this inequality is still a reality today. The impact of this has led to hard hearts and unwillingness to find a way to live and relate together for the mutual good. These are scars that we have inherited from our past. We recognise that society in South Africa is still very divided along ethnic lines. In this way, we see that the laws of apartheid have been repealed, but the spirit of it still lives on. This current reality of an unequal society has also expressed itself as xenophobia.

Being content with the current status quo will not bring about the change that is needed. What is needed is active participation in the creation of a new society. This is both a mixture of addressing the laws, the systems and the hardened hearts that resulted from these laws and policies.

## **3. OUR HISTORY HAS WOUNDED EVERYONE IN SOUTH AFRICA IN DIFFERENT WAYS.**

Apartheid created a society that broke relationships in many ways. Entire communities were broken, families were shattered and inter-ethnic relationships were marked by mistrust, dishonour and even hatred. This has wounded all South Africans in different ways. It is recognised, however, that the wounds that black South Africans experienced have been more material; economic oppression that generations have lived through.

Jesus summarised the law into two commandments: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is similar: "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-38). The system of apartheid made it illegal to love neighbours who were ethnically different. It reinforced mistruths and stereotypes about our neighbours. This has had significant implications for the ease of building cross-cultural friendships.

## **4. LAWS, STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES DON'T CHANGE HEARTS.**

Laws and policies create the platform or the environment in which the sin of prejudice is not condoned or promoted. Laws provide boundaries, but not new hearts. The law stops hatred from becoming murder. The law cannot stop someone from hating. Only the gospel has the power to transform people's hearts from hatred to respect, honour and love. True behaviour and attitude change require heart transformation.

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#### **5. DIVERSITY INCLUDES ALL ETHNICITIES AND CULTURES, INCLUDING THOSE FROM OTHER NATIONS.**

Diversity and honouring all is not limited to South Africans only. Christ-followers are to engage with and honour all people. This includes people who moved to the country after 1994.

These residents of this country are not mere observers of what is happening in this country, but are to be active participants in shaping this new society.

### **AS COMMON GROUND CHURCH**

#### **1. WE ACTIVELY TEACH GOSPEL-MOTIVATED DIVERSITY.**

As a local church, we bring gospel truth about diversity and reconciliation. We see it as an area of discipleship, guiding people into greater depths of understanding and application. To be a relevant and credible witness to the whole of the city, we are to understand the changing times we are in and bring gospel truth to the social narrative. If we are silent, we give up our voice to the loudest message in society.

We speak truth to correct mistruths that are conveyed in society, understand and engage with new social issues, and inform and shape personal relationships across ethnic lines. We guide people towards a greater dependence on God for the expression of this area of their faith in an ever-changing context.

#### **2. WE DISCIPLE PEOPLE TO PROACTIVELY SEEK RECONCILIATION.**

*2 Corinthians 5:19 says "And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation". This is speaking to the vertical reconciliation of humankind to God. And this particular part of the gospel message is a powerful motivator to seek horizontal reconciliation. If I have been reconciled with God, and the old has gone and the new has come (v17), then what reason do I have to remain unreconciled to my fellow brothers and sisters?*

The gospel is the means of horizontal reconciliation. My new identity as a child of God is a shared identity with any and every other believer. In this way, the gospel is both the motivation and the means for horizontal reconciliation.

As we recognise the vertical push from God to followers, so there is the motivation for a horizontal push from person to person. This truth is to be conveyed in love: "Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ." We see that God is on the side of the oppressed and downtrodden (Psalm 9:9, 12:5), and his church is to take up the fight against injustices that lead to this oppression.

### **3. GOSPEL - FUELLED DIVERSITY MOTIVATES US TO MOVE TOWARDS OTHERS; NOT WAITING FOR THEM TO COME TO US.**

We are not mere witnesses, wringing our hands in anxiety – but rather the very body of Christ, empowered and commissioned to bring about this change. We are not victims, powerless to affect a difference – but the body of Christ, who has conquered sin, including the sin of racism and prejudice. We carry with us the message of reconciliation and the means of bringing peace where there is discord. To remain silent is consigning ourselves to being an irrelevant social club, aloof or distant from the daily reality of our context.

The church is uniquely positioned to teach and model reconciliation. It is recognised that it is not the only entity that is working in this space. It is also recognised that this area of discipleship is one of Christ's many priorities. It should therefore not be over-emphasised or under-emphasised. The elders are to discern how much and how often they are to address this topic.

### **4. WE DESIRE TO BE A WELCOMING, INCLUSIVE, AND MISSIONAL COMMUNITY.**

Regardless of the particular geographic community in which a congregation is placed, we want to be a place and community where all feel welcome. Each congregation discerns how best they are to express this.

Cross-cultural relationships allow for missional opportunities. The Samaritan woman that Jesus ministered in John 4 and led the entire town to hear the gospel. A truly diverse community is a demonstration of the reconciling work of Jesus, proclaiming that identity in Christ is primary and ethnic culture is secondary. The church is then a lighthouse to the world that unity in the midst of diversity is possible. The things that the world calls barriers to community become blessings under Christ.



## **5. WE ARE COMMITTED TO TAKING EVERYONE FORWARD FROM WHERE THEY ARE ON THEIR JOURNEY.**

We recognise that people are in different stages of the journey of living out a Christ-honouring way of relating to people who are different to them. This is a deeply personal and emotional journey; one which affects self-identity and beliefs that have been held for a long time.

Peter received a revelation from God regarding his issue of prejudice against Gentiles in Acts 10. Yet, we read in Galatians 2:11-14 that Paul later challenged Peter's duplicity in his treating certain groups differently, undermining the unity and message of the gospel. It would appear that Peter had slid back to his old behaviour and attitudes again. Even after a direct revelation from God, Peter was still grappling with how to relate to people of different ethnicity. This illustrates that this is a journey, not a destination.

We welcome everyone who may be considered racists, bigots, and intolerant. We believe the gospel is the hope for overcoming these sins, and that a diverse, accountable community will bring healing. We want to show how to live under the lordship of Jesus.

Even though we welcome people on different stages of the journey, we will not tolerate or condone actions, attitudes and speech that is divisive, harmful or dishonouring in our communities. They must be challenged with gospel truth. For those who are members of CGC, this behaviour, like other sins, will be challenged and addressed, and, if unrepentant, become an area of discipline.

## **6. WE SEEK TO BE EMPOWERED BY GOD'S SPIRIT AND LED BY HIS WORD.**

Recognising that this call for unity in diversity is gospel-based, we take heart knowing that God will empower and strengthen us to do this work. He calls us to this. This is far beyond political and social movements. It is the work of God in our generation in our context. This call requires us to work, but we are not alone. We are guided by scripture and have the message and power of the gospel.

We preach the gospel and teach people the implications for their daily lives. The gospel is reconciling in nature, and his guidance of individual Christ-followers will lead to various expressions of reconciliation. This cannot be programmed or overly structured.

## **7. WE SEEK TO HONOUR EACH OTHER, VALUING OUR ETHNIC DIFFERENCES.**

The gospel empowers believers to live in authentic, honouring relationships: "Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves" (Romans 12:9-10).

Our communities are to be marked by deep honouring of each other. Despite political, ethnic, gender, socio-economic and cultural differences, we are to outdo one another in showing honour. This posture of humility affirms the intrinsic worth and dignity of each one another, and builds a bridge for ongoing relationships. This requires us to learn from each other, discovering ways in which we can best honour each other.

Another text which prescribes how Christ-followers are to relate to each other in the midst of inter-ethnic relations is Colossians 3:11-14: "Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."

## **HOW TO LEAD & DISCIPLE PEOPLE**

What follows are discipleship areas that are applications or responses. This cannot be prescribed but involves each Christ-follower seeking out the areas of their life that require repentance, as well as the actions that may need to be taken. This will be expressed differently in each person.

### **GO ON A JOURNEY**

As with many other areas of personal discipleship, this is a journey of ever-deepening understanding and application. Being reconciled to others is not a finite end-state, but rather a posture of relating.

It is important that there is intentionality. Passivity or waiting for others to come to you to be reconciled will not bring about change. An unwillingness to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation is to leave an area of life outside of the lordship of Christ. The reasons we have to not desire reconciliation – prejudice, pride, fear, selfishness and denying the reconciling power of the gospel – need to be addressed with gospel truth.

### **LISTEN AND SEEK TO UNDERSTAND**

The posture of Christ-followers when engaging with issues of reconciliation is one of listening. "My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" (James 1:19). Much conflict and tension between ethnically diverse groups and individuals are rooted in misunderstanding and an unwillingness to truly listen to the other party.

For there to be a meeting of minds and hearts between previously divided groups, a culture of listening must be fostered.

Listening to the voices of those who have experienced racial injustice and oppression is essential for people to gain perspective, respect and honour. One cannot hide behind ignorance regarding the past that our country has experienced.

## **PERSONALLY REPENT**

As one engages with issues of diversity and reconciliation, the Holy Spirit will convict us of our sins. This should lead to repentance for personal sin. As mentioned, this is not a once-off event, but rather a journey of a deepening experience of sanctification. When relevant, seeking forgiveness for sinning against your “brother or sister” is a natural and necessary next step (Matthew 5:23-26).

There should also be recognition and repentance of the sins of one’s people. Nehemiah 1:6-7 reveals how Nehemiah confessed his own sin and that of his father’s family. Daniel 9:4-6 outlines Daniel’s prayer of confession with the pronoun ‘we’. When appropriate, public and personal confessions of the sins of one’s people can bring healing and build a bridge of reconciliation.

## **BE RECONCILED**

Being reconciled across ethnic lines is a daily experience. It is not an event, but rather a series of small and big moments in one’s life where the barriers to true relationships are addressed. It cannot be an academic or religious exercise but is a deeply emotional and spiritual practice. Being reconciled is putting things right between two alienated parties in order to restore a relationship. It is about justice and harmony, which is a higher calling than simple tolerance. Reconciliation and our faith are linked. Matthew 5:23-26 illustrates how our worship of God must be preceded by being reconciled to others. We cannot assume that our lack of reconciliation is somehow excusable.

## **BUILD PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

Building relationships with those from other ethnic heritages is a powerful tool of transformation. An academic discussion on reconciliation will not transform us; relationships will. They create the space for exploration, challenging stereotypes, learning to relate, and building honour towards each other. Reconciliation cannot happen without a relationship.

## **DOCTRINAL STATEMENT OF “WHAT WE BELIEVE” (For use in DNA docs etc.)**

We believe all ethnicities were created by God and declared good. Our ethnic heritage has no bearing on our standing before God; we are all equal in dignity and worth before God.

Christ-followers are given a new identity and position as God's children, meaning that all believers are brothers and sisters, making earthly and eternal unity possible.

Jesus is our perfect model for dealing with human diversity and expressing radical inclusion, and he sends his followers on missions to all ethnicities in the world. We believe that God calls all his followers to be united in the midst of ethnic diversity.

Undermining God's shalom through prejudicial actions and attitudes is, therefore, sin.

Through his work of redemption - in his life death and resurrection - Jesus offers healing, forgiveness and ongoing sanctification for his followers.

The gospel is both the motivation and the means for reconciliation. Given the nature of belief in the gospel, Christ-followers ought to pursue diverse relationships and, where necessary, reconciliation and restitution. In the South African context, we believe God would place a high priority within the collective church and the everyday life of believers to aim towards crossing ethnic and socio-economic divides.

Eph 4:3; Gen 1:26,31; Gal 3:23-29; Col 2:11; Eph 2:11-22; Rom 8:15; Eph 1:5; Matt 28:28-30; 1 John 2:9; Rom 12:1-2; 2 Cor 5:17-20; Philemon 8-20.